

# Meg Webster Two Walls 1984/2022





Meg Webster (b. 1944, San Francisco, CA) has long been guided by an environmentalist impulse to celebrate and preserve the natural world. For *Two Walls* 1984/2022, Webster has remade two works, *Soft Broch* (1984/2022) and *Long Gates* (1984/2022), which comprised her solo exhibition of the same title at 101 Spring Street in 1984.

*Soft Broch* and *Long Gates* are made from earthen materials, hay and rammed earth, respectively. Based on the simple geometry of a square and a circle, each work is an enterable form, a square in rammed earth and a circle in hay, which function as meeting places. The works were first made in 1983, not long after a nuclear war scare with Russia in fall of that year, and now made again in 2022 at a time of climate crisis and on-going human-caused mass extinction.<sup>1</sup> With these grave challenges in mind, the works focus the viewer’s attention on the symbiosis between humans and the natural world. As Webster stated in a 2016 interview, “I want you to love more. I want you to care more . . . It’s about caring for the structure of nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Webster began making sculptures in sand in organic and geometric shapes in the late 1970s. Inspired by the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Michael Heizer, whom she worked for as an assistant in 1983, Webster also creates large-scale installations that encourage correspondence between natural materials and the body. *Soft Broch*, the title given to the piece by Judd during installation, is a reference to *brochs*, Scottish Iron Age roundhouses that were likely used as places of refuge for people and livestock.

Judd and Webster met in 1983 during Webster’s tenure as a student in the MFA program at Yale University, likely around the time of Judd’s lecture at the Yale University School of Art on September 23, 1983.<sup>3</sup> After seeing her work at Yale, Judd invited Webster to have an exhibition on the ground floor of 101 Spring Street. *Two Walls* (January 17–February 18, 1984) was Webster’s first solo exhibition in New York City. Webster credits her exhibition at 101 Spring Street with the opportunity to produce her first large-scale outdoor work, *Hollow*, the following year (1985) at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art. Webster’s recent exhibition, *Wave*, at The Arts Center at Governor’s Island (June 12–October 31, 2021) included newly commissioned works and pieces from 1989 to the present. A long-term presentation of Webster’s work will open at Dia Beacon in Beacon, New York in 2023.



Meg Webster in Conversation with Caitlin Murray, Director of Archives and Programs

CM  
I was hoping we could begin our conversation with a discussion of your early life and how you started working with natural materials.

MW  
I grew up in New Hampshire then moved around, married a couple times, and ended up in New York. I had a year in San Francisco that was fabulous. That brought me to New York, and I have never left. I moved to New York the same moment John Lennon was shot [December 1980]. My work comes out of playing with sticks at the edge of a river where I lived in Norfolk, Virginia. I had started binding sticks together into figures. Later, I had a studio space on Portrero Hill in San Francisco where I started making sand works, which were quite interesting. I began shaping sand with a brush. They were very precise and fragile and had an active sensation of gravity. These were the works that I submitted for acceptance to Yale’s MFA program. I was in my late 30s when I went to Yale. I met a lot of wonderful artists there, Don Judd being one of them.

CM  
What were you working on at Yale when you met Judd?

MW  
At that time, I was making bed forms out of sand. These were first of the bed forms that I made. They were meant as symbols of mating, pleasure, and safety.

I had recently made a piece called *Cookie* that Don saw. It was a very thin walled, circular piece in soil that took a long time to set-up. Don was using the ground floor of 101 Spring Street to show work, so he contacted me and asked me if I wanted to do a show and I said yes. I had recently been working for Michael Heizer, which is one of the reasons why I think my pieces at Spring Street ended up being as big as they were. I was more adventurous after having watched him work.

CM  
Can you tell me about the two pieces that you made for the exhibition at 101 Spring Street, *Long Gates* (1984) and *Soft Broch* (1984)?

MW  
I made both works onsite on the ground floor of Spring Street. *Long Gates* and *Soft Broch* are based on the simple geometry of a square and circle. Long Gates was made of rammed earth. I drove the materials over to Spring Street in my Datsun and the photo of my Datsun with hay strapped to the top became the image for the exhibition announcement. People were meant to walk into *Long Gates* and to look at each other, to encounter each other. Same with *Soft Broch*, which I made in hay. In the case of the *Long Gates*, it was about symbolically seeing a potential partner and then going into the circular space, *Soft Broch*. It was a meeting piece in a way, and they were also, you know, sculptural, a square and a circle, soil and hay. I made *Long Gates* the height of Don’s piece which he installed there on the ground floor. Don was up on another floor of the building when I was loading the dirt for *Long Gates*. He sensed the

building being put into tension and came running down the elevator and said that that it was the right amount . . . just enough. It was very funny. I had worked with soil before, but it was the first time I had used hay. I think I initially was going to cover the hay in soil so that both pieces would be in the same material, but it was nice the way it was, uncovered. Don actually named the piece *Soft Broch*; I think because of his interest in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> I’ll never forget, the final moment when I left after the opening. I went and looked back through the windows, and I thought, “Oh, wow. This is really unusual.” The exhibition at Spring Street really led to everything for me. A lot of work came from it. I had shows not long after at the Nassau County Museum and the Mattress Factory. The work I made for the Nassau County Museum, *Hollow*, was my first outdoor installation and the first time I used plants. It was a big, big circular work that was dug into the ground. It had an interior walkway. I planted the soil walls with red clover, spring bulbs and flowering perennials. It was an important piece for me.<sup>2</sup> CM Can you say more about these works as sites for encounter with materials as well as encounters between people? MW Some works later on were just about the work . . . your body and the work, but these pieces are specifically about going into them. I view these works as mating pieces. They were made at a time when nuclear war was being threatened.<sup>3</sup> I believe that mating is the best thing we’ve got.

It’s the beginning of culture, beginning of family. It’s love. And so, I made these pieces to counter-act nuclear war by bringing the viewer into direct contact with earthen materials and primary sculptural forms. There is an architectural quality to everything I’ve made. I’m not making architecture, but I’m responding to architecture. I am very concerned now about the coming mass extinction. It’s as if people don’t realize that insects and animals are living and cognizant. They don’t understand the impact of over-developing so much of the land. I have and continue to be very concerned about the environment.

<sup>1</sup> Nate Jones and David E. Hoffman, “Newly released documents shed light on 1983 nuclear war scare with Soviets,” *The Washington Post*, February 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/soviet-nuclear-war-able-archer/2021/02/17/711fa9e2-7166-11eb-93be-c10813e358a2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/soviet-nuclear-war-able-archer/2021/02/17/711fa9e2-7166-11eb-93be-c10813e358a2_story.html); Cowie, R.H., Bouchet, P. and Fontaine, B. (2022), *The Sixth Mass Extinction: fact, fiction or speculation?*. Biol Rev. <https://doi.org/10.1111/brev.12816>.  
<sup>2</sup> “Meg Webster: I Want You to Care More.” Video. YouTube. Posted by Out of Sync, June 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgZhmsiG1X4>.  
<sup>3</sup> Judd published this lecture as “Art and Architecture” (1983), see *Donald Judd Writings* (Judd Foundation/David Zwirner Books, 2016).



Meg Webster  
*Two Walls* 1984/2022  
101 Spring Street  
March 25–May 21, 2022

Public hours:  
Thursdays, Fridays, & Saturdays  
1:00–5:00pm

*Two Walls* 1984/2022  
is made possible with support  
from Agnes Gund  
and Paula Cooper Gallery.

Cover and interior:  
Installation view, Meg Webster,  
*Two Walls* 1984/2022, 101 Spring Street,  
Judd Foundation, New York,  
March 25–May 21, 2022. Photo  
Timothy Doyon © Judd Foundation.  
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Right:  
Photo: Meg Webster.

Below:  
Installation view, Meg Webster,  
*Two Walls*, 101 Spring Street,  
New York, January 17–February 18,  
1984. © Meg Webster. Courtesy  
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.  
Photo: Meg Webster.

#### Exhibition Checklist

*Soft Broch*, 1984/2022  
hay  
12 × 12 × 12 feet  
(365.8 × 365.8 × 365.8 cm)

*Long Gates*, 1984/2022  
rammed earth  
52 × 78 × 78 inches  
(132.1 × 198.1 × 198.1 cm)

